



Testimony: Alex Spurrier, Research and Policy Manager for ConnCAN

Appropriations Committee – Thursday, February 21, 2013

My name is Alex Spurrier and I am the Research and Policy Manager for the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), a statewide advocacy organization focused on ensuring that every child in Connecticut has access to a high-quality public education.

I want to thank Chairwoman Harp, Chairwoman Walker, and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am here today to testify in favor of the Governor's Budget Proposal concerning education, but with some serious reservations.

As you know, our state is facing a growing budget gap, forcing you – our elected representatives – to make difficult fiscal choices. But the billions of dollars we spend each year on educating our children are not being used efficiently.

If we are serious about ensuring that every child will have access to a great public education, regardless of race, income, or ZIP code, we need to fix how we distribute education funds to schools across Connecticut. Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant, which allocates over \$2 billion a year, relies on decade-old data, and it's been altered more than two dozen times. The result: how we distribute money is no longer clearly tied to student need.

Connecticut outspends almost every other state in the country on education per student, yet we have the largest achievement gap in the country. Connecticut's top performing students are falling behind the top students in Massachusetts.

Additionally, the ECS Task Force reported that thousands of students attending public schools of choice could be funded nine different ways, depending on the type of school they attend.¹ Connecticut's children deserve better. If we're going to provide the great public education our students deserve, we need to ensure that all children are funded fairly, regardless of the public school they attend.

There are some positive elements in the Governor's Proposed Budget that would improve how we distribute education funding, such as:

- Using Free and Reduced Price Lunch to measure poverty for the ECS formula, which will help identify more students that have additional learning needs;
- Changing the measure for town wealth in the ECS formula to Median Household Income, which helps provide a more accurate indicator of need; and
- A reduction in the ECS formula's minimum aid ratio, which reflects the need for the state to invest its scarce education dollars in communities less able to raise local revenue for education.

The Governor's budget proposal also makes an effort to improve funding for students in communities that are at a disadvantage under our current broken system of school finance. Targeted increases in

¹ Final Report. State Task Force to Study Education Funding. 2013.

<http://www.cga.ct.gov/ed/CostSharing/Documents/2013/ECS%20TASK%20FORCE%20Final%20Report%201-23-13.pdf>

conditional funding for the Alliance Districts, which serve the vast majority of Connecticut's low-income and English Language Learner students, are a first step towards improving the overall equity of our school finance system.

These are important and overdue changes, but this budget proposal does not address the fundamental issue. All students in public schools must be funded fairly. The ECS formula changes in this budget propose higher foundation amounts (\$11,754), plus 30 percent additional funding for students who live in poverty. Even if this formula were fully funded, thousands of students at public schools of choice would still be funded through different systems, with no additional funding for students in poverty.

For example, a low-income student who moves from a traditional public school to a high-quality public charter school would receive \$4,280 less annual funding from the state. If that student stayed in a high-quality public charter school from Kindergarten to graduation, our state would spend \$55,643 less on his or her education than it would if he or she had stayed in a traditional public school.

That is fundamentally unfair. If we are serious about ensuring access to a great public education for every child, we must take a stand — as a state — and fund all public school students fairly.

The Governor's budget proposal makes some good incremental changes to the ECS formula, but we need to set our sights on more fundamental reforms. We must create a consistent, fair, and equitable school finance system.

The goal must be to level the playing field for all public school students, so that every kid in Connecticut has a shot at receiving the high-quality public education they need and deserve.

Let's make an investment in the future of our children and fix our education funding formula.

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